

# A Rideau Canal Tragedy

Gerry Purchase and Owen Cooke

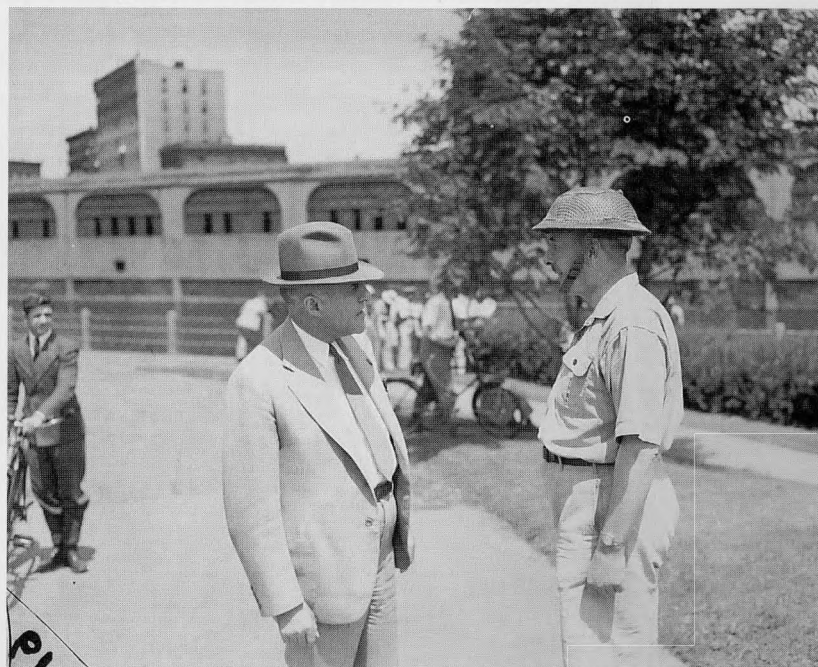
On 2 July 1942, two young Canadian soldiers on duty drowned in the Rideau Canal in downtown Ottawa. Amid the major horrors of the Second World War the victims of this tragedy have been almost forgotten.

That year, the government designated the first week of July as Army Week, to focus attention on a service which, with the notable exception of the débâcle at Hong Kong, had seen virtually no action in the war. To attract recruits and sell Victory Bonds, demonstrations and displays took place in cities and towns across Canada and in Britain. In Ottawa, two platoons of officer cadets from the Officers Training Centre in Brockville were to demonstrate a mock attack on the police station, which at that time was at the north end of Elgin Street towards Confederation Square. One platoon intended to reach the objective by crossing the Rideau Canal. The officer cadets planned to drop into the east side of the canal from the wall south of Union Station, today the Government Conference Centre, and, in full kit, swim the canal at an angle, coming out at a set of steps, since disappeared, at a spot under the present-day Mackenzie King Bridge. Lieutenant T.M. MacDonald was to lead the swimmers. When they emerged, the soldiers were to join the other platoon for a final assault with blank ammunition on the police station.

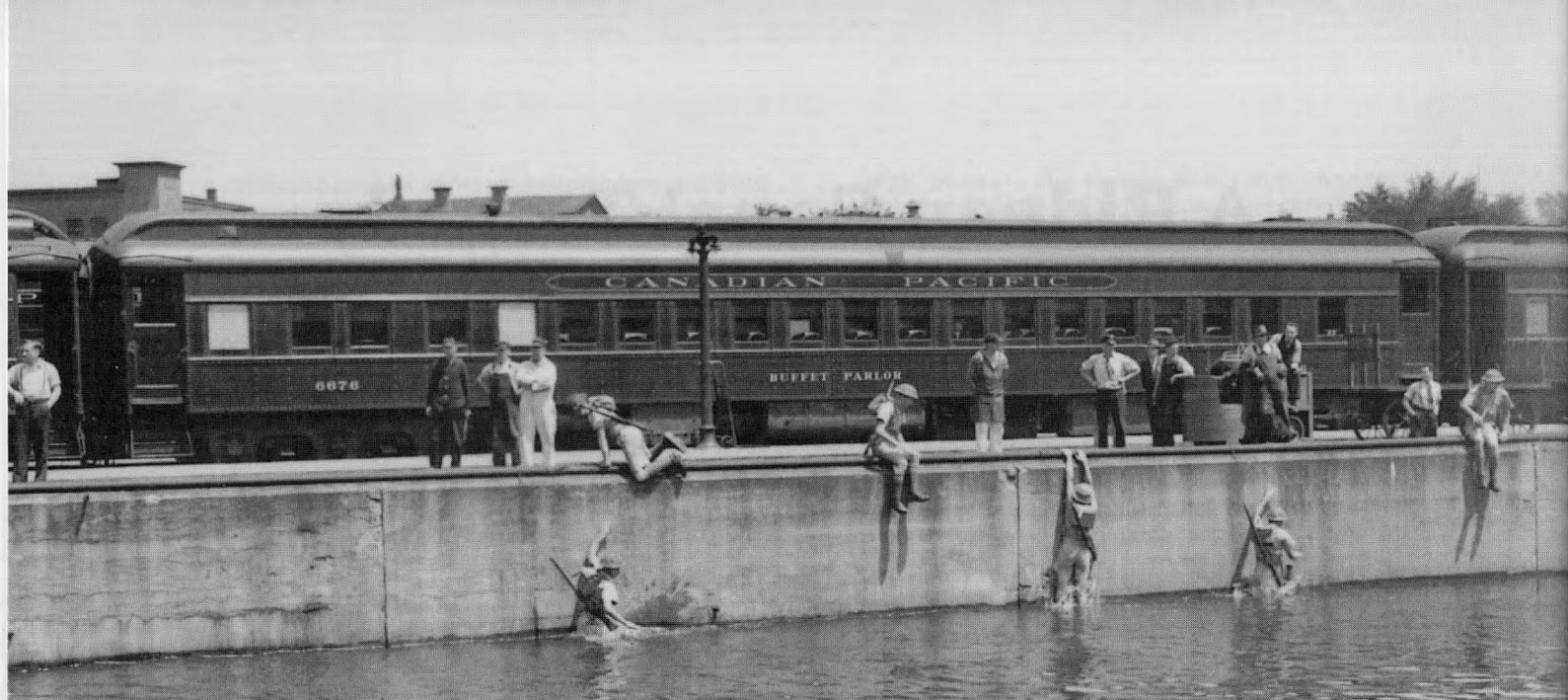
Left, the Minister of National Defence, Colonel the Hon. J.L. Ralston, meets one of the officers running the Army Week demonstration from O.1 Officers Training School, Brockville, before the exercise begins. The photo was taken in the park on the west side of the Rideau Canal. Note the railway station platforms in the background across the canal just south of the present-day Government Conference Centre.



The canal was approximately 20 metres wide and three metres deep, with a drop of two metres from the bank to the water surface. The officer cadets were all experienced soldiers then undergoing training to become subaltern officers. Many of them had already served overseas: all had practised the swim in a flooded quarry near Brockville. The swim was not part of their normal training programme, but all members of the platoon had volunteered for it. They wore summer fighting order: cotton shorts and shirtsleeves with heavy boots and puttees, full webbing equipment with small packs, waterbottles, steel helmets, rifles and bayonets, about eighteen kilograms (forty pounds) of kit in all. Although 20 men would be in the water at once, the only safety precautions consisted of one man in a boat and one on shore serving as lifeguards. Onlookers at the demonstration







The platoon carrying out the simulated assault water crossing drop into the water from the east side of the Rideau Canal. Note the drop down to the water which put some of the swimmers into difficulty.

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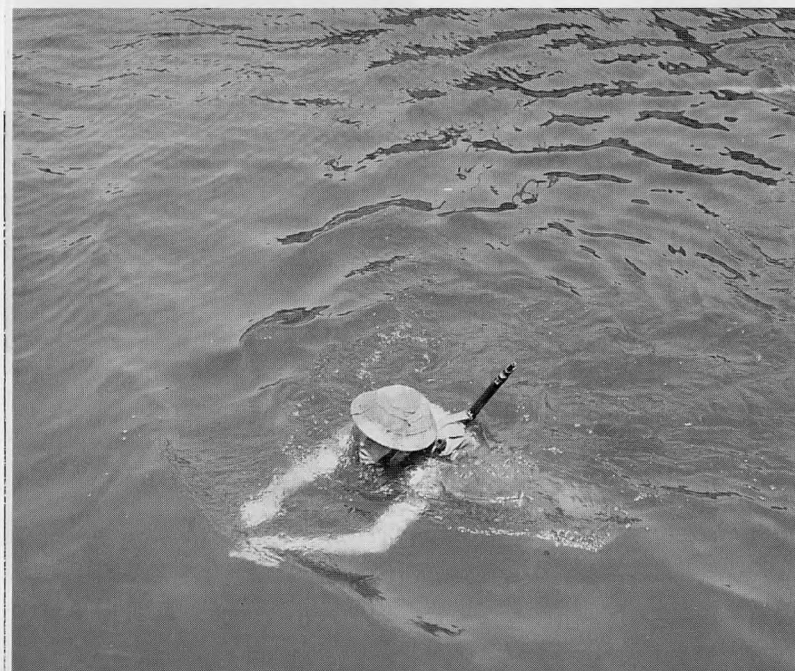
included a large crowd of wartime civil servants out on the canal bank for lunch, as well as the Hon. J.L. Ralston, Minister of National Defence.

The initial drop from the canal wall to the water surface, for which the officer cadets had not practised, caused their packs to fill suddenly with water and made the swim much more difficult. Although many in the platoon made the crossing safely, a number of the swimmers were soon in trouble and the lifeguards were overwhelmed in their attempts to reach everyone. Several onlookers, notably Able Seaman R.W. Richardson from Naval Service

Headquarters, dove into the water to rescue the struggling soldiers. In the end, five swimmers were pulled unconscious from the water and artificial respiration attempts began immediately. Although three were revived and hospitalized, Officer Cadets James Stanley Richardson and Raymond Lawton Roberts drowned.

Many of the spectators apparently did not realize that anything was amiss, but Ralston was deeply affected by what he had seen. He hurried to the House of Commons to report the incident immediately.

**Below left:** This officer cadet, with steel helmet and rifle, is swimming smoothly. **Below right:** Officer cadets (and rescuers?) in the Canal. The cadet in the foreground is still wearing his small pack, but there is no sign of helmet or rifle.



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In this photo the officer cadets are still in the water, although one has reached the steps on the west side of the Rideau Canal. The crossing is at a considerable angle down the Canal.

At the time, the newspapers reported and commented on the tragedy at length but it was soon overshadowed by the major events of the war and forgotten by the public. In Parliament, Ralston promised a full inquiry, but the results were apparently never made public. The military Court of Inquiry concluded only that there had

been an error in judgement: the government has never released the name of the officer responsible.

Funerals for the two officer cadets who met such unfortunate and untimely death were held in their respective hometowns.

Soldiers coming out of canal on the west side. The officer cadets are carrying steel helmets, small packs and Lee-Enfield rifles, and are wearing heavy ankle boots. At bottom right, on the top step, are packages of .303 ammunition, presumably dry blanks for the 'assault' on the police station on Elgin Street. Note the crowds, many of them government workers on lunch break.



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**James Stanley Richardson** was born in St. Stephen, NB, on 13 July 1920. He attended St. Stephen High School, 1934-1937, where he was an army cadet, following which he spent eight months at St. Stephen Business College, 1937-1938. After graduation he was employed as a junior bank clerk with the Bank of Nova Scotia, 1938-1940.

He enlisted in the Carleton and York Regiment in Woodstock, NB, on 24 February 1940. He transferred to the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment on 12 September 1940 and was promoted Sergeant in the unit the same day. Richardson embarked at Halifax with his battalion on 18 July 1941. He served with the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment in the United Kingdom until 29 March 1942 when he returned to Canada to attend the Officer Training Centre, Brockville, Ont. He died just before his 22nd birthday.

He is buried in the Rural Cemetery, St. Stephen, NB.

**Raymond Lawton Roberts** was born in Sydney, N.S., 23 June 1914. He moved from Nova Scotia to Toronto with his family at about age six. He attended the High School of Commerce, 1927-1929, and Farquharson Private School, 1929-1930. He worked for the Ontario Treasury Department, 1929-1934, first as an office boy and later as a civil service clerk. In 1934, he moved on to British American Oil, then to Harris, Ramsay and Co., bond dealers, 1935-1940, as a trader, clerk, and office manager.

On 30 June 1934, Roberts married Lillian Mae Yates at St. Michael's and All Angels Anglican Church in Toronto. By 1940 they had two young daughters.

Roberts served in the reserve battalion of the Royal Regiment of Canada from 16 July 1940 until he joined the Canadian Active Service Force 16 December 1940. He was promoted to Acting Sergeant the same day. He embarked from Halifax 4 February 1941. In Britain he served with 1 Canadian Infantry Holding Unit and 2 Division Infantry Reinforcement Unit, instructing on platoon weapons. He took courses in drill, Bren gun, internal economy and administration, and a physical training course at the Irish Guards Depot. He was appointed a Warrant Officer II, Company Sergeant Major, on 1 December 1941.

In April 1942 Roberts returned to Canada for officer training. He apparently travelled as a prisoner of war escort before reporting to the the Officer Training Centre, Brockville, Ont. He was 28 at the time of his death.

His military funeral was held in Toronto, and he is buried in Prospect Cemetery.

The officer in helmet is likely Lieutenant T.M. MacDonald, the platoon commander, who led his officer cadets in the swim. To the left, a rescuer prepares to enter the water.



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Fellow officer cadets and school staff administer artificial respiration to a swimmer pulled from the water.

## Sources

The authors are most grateful to Mr. Peter Robertson, formerly of the National Archives of Canada, for drawing their attention to the series of National Defence photographs of the Canal tragedy. The late Ellwood Girling, who also trained at the Officers Training Centre, Brockville, first told Gerry Purchase about this incident.

### National Archives of Canada

O1 Officers Training Centre, Brockville, Ontario. War diary, July 1942. RG 24 vol. 16,936.

### Personnel Files

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G-17646 James Stanley Richardson.

### Archives of Ontario

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### Printed Materials

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*Toronto Daily Star*. 3, 6 July 1942.

Gerry Purchase developed an early interest in military history while serving in the wartime Reserve Battalion of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles and later in the Canadian Officers' Training Corps. His older brother, Lieutenant John R. Purchase, trained at the Officers Training Centre, Brockville and volunteered for the Canloan programme. He was killed in action in July 1944 while serving in the 4th Battalion, Royal Welch Fusiliers.

Owen Cooke is an independent researcher and archivist. For many years, he was chief archivist at the Directorate of History, Department of National Defence.